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The Catholic Fund for Overseas Development
2 Romero Close
Stockwell Road, London SW9 9TY
Facsimile: 071-274 9630 Telex: 893347 CAFOD G
Telephone: 071-733 7900

NEWS

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RESPONSE TO THE INVASION OF KUWAIT BAFFLES TIMORESE 28.1.91

The international reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has led to a wave of demonstrations in East Timor, the predominately Roman Catholic south east Asian island which for 15 years has been occupied by Indonesian forces.

CAFOD, the Catholic overseas development agency, is receiving reports from partners that protests in East Timor are being viciously suppressed by the army, and that many people, fearing for their lives, have taken refuge in church buildings.

Since the Indonesians invaded East Timor in 1975 more than 100,000 of the island's 700,000 population have been killed in combat, human-made famines and concentration camps. The scale of the killing is proportionately worse than Pol Pot's genocidal regime in Cambodia.

Steve Alston, CAFOD's East Timor project officer, says, 'When Kuwait was invaded, many Timorese saw a parallel with their own situation and demonstrated in the hope that the occupation of their country would be treated with equal concern, particularly as at least one seventh of the population have been wiped out since the Indonesians invaded.

'Many Timorese are baffled that the world community has taken no action against Indonesia's gross violation of international law and the UN charter. In the mean time it seems the military regime in East Timor continues the repression and violence. Threatened with detention and torture, some take refuge in parish churches or the bishop's house in the capital, Dili.'

There were similar reports of torture and repression of people who took part in demonstrations following the Pope's visit in 1989 when he spoke about human rights on the island.

Indonesian military action and policies such as restricting where Timorese can farm, have led to a continuing cycle of hunger and malnutrition. Tuberculosis is a major problem and the infant mortality rate is estimated to be, at times, 50 per cent. CAFOD plans to support community health schemes on the island.

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For more information contact Mark Topping at CAFOD press office.

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